

# BOLD Moves

## • Reclaim Tacoma's Waterfront •

by Sharon Baerny

Waterfront property is a hot commodity in short supply, but not when cities look at old sites in new ways. After 20 years of tolerating an agonizing eyesore, the city of Tacoma, Washington launched a successful redevelopment of its contaminated and deserted waterfront, reclaiming the area for its citizens and bringing economic development to a destitute part of downtown.

For over a century, the Thea Foss waterway, an inlet off Commencement Bay, was railroad property and a busy maritime center. The waterfront evolved as commerce changed over time, from mining to flour milling to chemical refineries, each new industry leaving behind its legacy of contamination. Yet by the 1970s, the businesses were gone and all that remained of the formerly bustling waterfront were decay and pollution. In 1981, the EPA designated the waterway part of a larger Superfund site.

Tacoma's ambitious redevelopment started 10 years later with the vision and nerve of the city and its council. Since that time, bold decisions and innovative partnerships have laid the foundation for a flourishing restorative development.

### **Risking city dollars**

Tacoma had a vision for its waterfront that started with money, albeit not enough money. In 1991, the city of Tacoma won \$2.2 million from a state

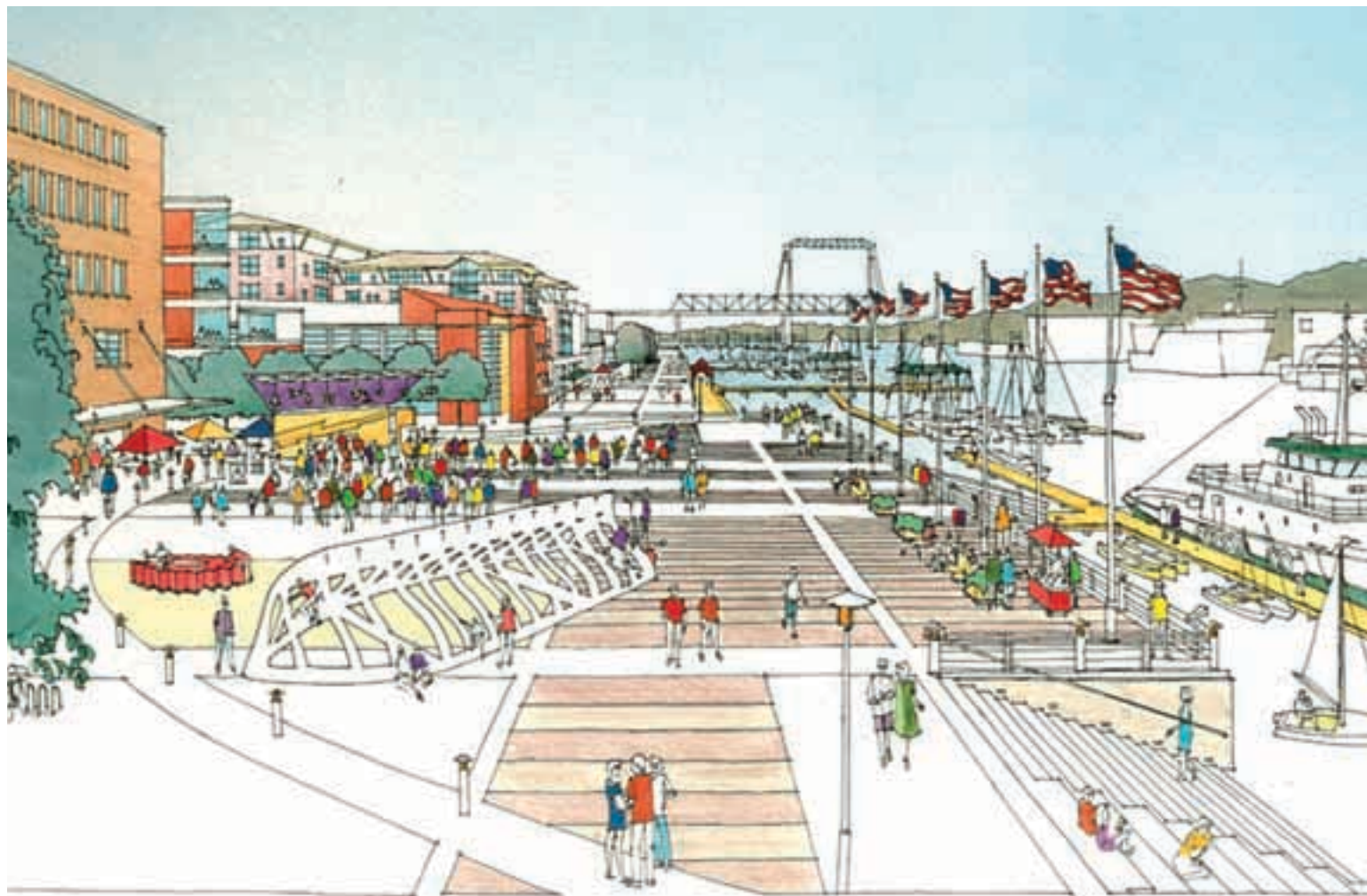
program for waterfront acquisition, then had to determine which properties to buy. The city ached to purchase the abandoned land along the waterway, but this grant could only be used for parks and open spaces. So the city council raised over \$4 million through a bond, and Tacoma combined the grant with the bond money to purchase the land from the railroad. The private sector could never risk purchasing 42 acres of contaminated land within a Superfund site. Tacoma did: After 20 years of tolerating the eyesore that was the waterfront, the city bought the initial 27 acres and later 15 more.

Next the city had to find financing to move forward with remediation and development. When Tacoma was chosen as an EPA brownfield pilot in 1996, it received \$200,000 earmarked for site assessment and cleanup. But the city chose to accelerate its plans by using the money to start the Foss Waterway District Authority (FWDA), the organization responsible for the redevelopment of the waterfront. In another bold move, Tacoma essentially leveraged the fact that the waterfront was a brownfield to launch the redevelopment.



Coal tar creosote seeping into the waterway

CITY OF TACOMA PHOTO



The public esplanade will connect the Thea Foss with the popular Ruston Way waterfront.

CITY OF TACOMA IMAGE

### Creative remediation through partnership

Before building comes cleanup, however. Due to a division of responsibilities established in 1989, the EPA has jurisdiction over the water, and Washington State's Department of Ecology presides over the uplands. Cleaning up the waterway is a complex process that has only just begun and will take another two years to complete. For building on land, however, Ecology was able to partner with Tacoma to speed up redevelopment with an innovative consent decree. The city entered into an order of consent taking responsibility for the sites, but getting permission to do the cleanup over time: "Instead of just going through and wholesale cleaning them up, they agreed to let us clean up these sites as development was to occur on

them," says Bart Alford, development division supervisor for the city of Tacoma.

The agreement was also innovative, says Marv Coleman site manager and inspector for the Department of Ecology, because it treated the 14 sites as one and provided a wholesale consent decree rather than require a separate one for each site. This approach streamlined the cleanup by creating a more predictable and consistent climate for the city and potential developers. The consent decree also made the sites more marketable by moving cleanup, bureaucracy and liability issues from the unknown to the known realm, enabling developers to determine up front the financial investment required for building on Tacoma's waterfront.

Furthermore, the consent decree gives the party responsible for cleanup one point of contact at the Department of Ecology. This policy eliminates yet another barrier in the cleanup process: chasing down an overworked Ecology employee when staff are busy working on other sites based on priority. "Both Ecology and the city recognized the validity of doing it that way," says Coleman, who acts as Tacoma's single point of contact.

Seattle, Portland and several East Coast cities have looked into the cooperative approach of the consent decree, says Coleman, although this type of agreement is really only feasible when dealing with just one entity. "Someone has to be willing to step forward and take on the liability," says Coleman. Because Tacoma made the bold move and bought all the waterfront property, the consent decree works.



**The Bridge of Glass and the Albers Museum.**

CITY OF TACOMA PHOTO

### **Partnering with the community**

With the land purchased and the consent decree in place, Tacoma sought to make its citizens a partner in the redevelopment effort. Numerous community meetings took place throughout the planning stages, especially during the programmatic environmental impact process. Discussions took over a year and included details such as how tall buildings could be, what kind of public access should be provided, and what kinds of activities people wanted to pursue on the waterfront. These public meetings even discussed details like the width of Dock Street, the street that runs along the waterfront. Through this interaction, the community helped to shape the vision for their waterfront, says Alford.

That vision is a new downtown neighborhood: a neighborhood with offices, retail spaces, residential units, parks and access to the waterfront. In fact, public access meant as much as public input while developing this plan. As a result, access to the waterway, view corridors, parks and a continuous esplanade became part of the vision. All this input was synthesized into a single master plan that will shape the redevelopment of the waterfront for years to come.

With planning complete, the city started offering exceptional tax incentives to entice developers and make this master plan a reality. Among the incentives offered to developers are a 10-year property tax exemption on housing developments of four or more units, and wage and B&O tax credits for hiring employees who live within a designated down-

town area. Obviously, an immediate return on investment is not Tacoma's first priority; building a viable and stable neighborhood on the waterfront is.

### **Luck brings immediate success**

The city's bold moves were rewarded with luck when a long-time Tacoma supporter approached the city with \$60 million for a proposed glass museum. The city cleaned up its first site, and the celebrated Museum of Glass opened July, 2002. The museum is a huge draw and a boon to Tacoma's waterfront revitalization. "We needed a very successful first project and this was a heck of a first project," claims Alford.

Even with successful redevelopment of the waterfront, Tacoma's downtown is still physically separated from the Thea Foss waterway by a freeway. The



University of Washington's Tacoma campus, the Washington State History Museum, a new Tacoma Art Museum and the renovated train station that is now the federal courthouse are core components of Tacoma's revitalized downtown. Yet this burgeoning cultural district lacked adequate access to the waterfront until more creative financing and good luck led to the building of the Chihuly Bridge of Glass, a pedestrian bridge designed by and named for renowned glass artist Dale Chihuly. This bridge spans the freeway with flair and provides an essential connection between the waterfront and the downtown core.

Not all will be shiny new on the waterfront, however. Heritage Properties of Alaska is renovating the historic Albers Mill building into a retail and residential space. The building's dilapidation made redevelopment expensive, but Heritage Properties specializes in development of historic rehabilitation tax credit properties. The juxtaposition of the staid red brick structure next to the daring metal cone of the Museum of Glass tells the story of the waterway's rebirth visually and literally, as the old and new exist side-by-side tying together Tacoma's past with Tacoma's future.

People gravitate toward the waterfront, Alford says. Yet "recapturing brownfield waterfront areas takes lots of commitment, courage, and a willingness to stick with it." The city of Tacoma has another 20 years before this waterfront project is complete, but vision and innovation have paved the way for successful redevelopment of this contaminated eyesore as the waterfront evolves into its newest role: a thriving downtown neighborhood. 🏡

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The Thea Foss waterway circa 1930

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